



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

Rynox + Hotel Splendide

Rynox

Director: Michael Powell
Production Company: Film Engineering Company
Producer: Jerome Jackson
Screenplay: Jerome Jackson, Michael Powell, Philip MacDonald, J. Jefferson Farjeon *
Based on the novel by: Philip MacDonald
Photography: Geoffrey Faithfull, Arthur Grant
Editor: A. Seabourne
Art Director: C.C. Waygrove
Construction: W. Saunders
Sound: Rex Howarth
Cast:
Stewart Rome (*F.X. Benedik*)
John Longden (*Anthony X. 'Tony' Benedik*)
Dorothy Boyd (*Peter Rickforth*)
Charles Paton (*Samuel Rickforth*)
Leslie Mitchell (*Woolrich*)
Sybil Grove (*secretary*)
Cecil Clayton
Fletcher Lightfoot (*Prout*)
Edmund Willard (*Captain James*)
UK 1931
48 mins
Digital 4K

Hotel Splendide

Directed by: Michael Powell
Production Company: Film Engineering Co. Ltd.
Presented by:
Gaumont-British Picture Corporation Ltd.
Produced by: Jerome Jackson
Screenplay: Ralph Smart *
Original story by: Philip MacDonald, Ralph Smart
Photography: Geoffrey Faithfull, Arthur Grant
Editor: A. Seabourne
Art Director: Charles Saunders *
Sound: Michael Rose
Recording: RCA Photophone
Studio: Nettlefold Studios (Walton-on-Thames)
Cast:
Jerry Verno (*Jerry Mason*)
Anthony Holles (*Mrs LeGrange*)
Edgar Norfolk (*Gentleman Charlie*)
Philip Morant (*Mr Meek*)
Sybil Groves (*Mrs Harkness*)
Vera Sherbourne (*Joyce Dacre*)
Paddy Browne (*Miss Meek*)
Michael Powell
(*Marconi, bugging device operator*) *
Frank Hubert *
UK 1932
53 mins
Digital 4K

* Uncredited

The remastering of *Rynox*, *Hotel Splendide*, *His Lordship*, *The Fire Raisers*, *Red Ensign* and *The Night of the Party* has been supported by Matt Spick and the Charles Skey Charitable Trust.

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During the 1930s, Michael Powell worked on 31 feature films, yet most of these are little known. This can be attributed mainly to two factors: first, they belong broadly to that category of films contemptuously referred to as 'quota quickies'. The origin of this term lies in the fact that nowhere in the act was there mentioned a quality test, or threshold; in fact, realistically speaking, the requirements for length and cost were so minimal as to practically preclude any quality at all, let alone the guarantee of a minimum standard. The 'quota quickies' sprang up as films that were made to exploit the protected market, or, in the case of the American producers, to fulfil their legal obligation in order to continue exporting their films to Britain.

The conception of these as merely films made to order and not considered highly even by those who made them, remained a pervasive one until very recently; Powell himself expressed an equal mixture of pride and disdain for them.

The second reason for the neglect of the over two-dozen films made by Powell before 1937 is the fact that most of them had been long thought lost. Of the first nine films Powell made as solo director, only three are known to survive, *Rynox*, *His Lordship* and *Hotel Splendide*, the latter two starring the comedian Jerry Verno, who appeared in four of Powell's early films (as well as making a cameo as the Covent Garden stage doorman in *The Red Shoes*).

These films were all made at breakneck speed, and in quick succession. In 'that incredible year' as Powell put it in his autobiography, he was constantly working, so that by the end of 1932 a grand total of seven films had been released. Sometimes within one week of each other, so that *My Friend the King* was released on 4 April, *The Rasp* on 11 April; and once within two days of each other. Powell has said that 'they couldn't all of them be good and they weren't', but nevertheless his first two films were, to everyone's surprise, extremely successful with the critics.

Rynox (1931) is the earliest surviving of Powell's films and it benefits enormously from an interesting cast, stylish filming and an ingenious plot. The film was based on a novel by Philip MacDonald, one of the most popular thriller writers of his day (he published seven novels in 1931 alone). He and Powell eventually worked on five films together.

When first released, *Rynox* was greeted with extravagant praise by the British press. C.A. Lejeune in *The Observer* famously claimed that Powell's *Rynox* shows what a good movie brain can do... this is the sort of pressure under which a real talent is shot red-hot into the world.' John Grierson, writing a review in the *Everyman*, entitled 'As Good as Hollywood', boldly stated that 'there never was an English film so well made.'

Powell's direction already shows his characteristic energy and visual imagination, as well as his debt to the German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s. *Rynox* is full of quick cuts, tracking shots, unusual angles as well as montages, all of which help effectively to draw attention away from Benedik's disguise as Marsh as well as the film's small budget (it all takes place on only six main sets, with few location shots added). Although nowadays one of the film's principal delights is seeing radio announcer Leslie Mitchell in an acting

POWELL BEFORE PRESSBURGER

Rynox + Hotel Splendide

Mon 16 Oct 18:10; Fri 10 Nov 18:10

His Lordship

Tue 17 Oct 20:50; Sat 4 Nov 12:20

The Fire Raisers

Wed 18 Oct 18:40; Sat 11 Nov 12:30

Red Ensign + The Night of the Party

Tue 24 Oct 20:30; Sun 5 Nov 14:40

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role, the film also boasts an excellent performance by Stewart Rome, who totally convinces in the dual roles of Benedik and Marsh.

In *Hotel Splendide*, Jerry Verno plays a character dear to the filmmakers and audiences of the quota/depression years: an impoverished go-getter trying to improve his station in life.

Before entering films, Michael Powell (like the Verno character) had worked in a boring desk job, and went on to live and work with his father, who owned a hotel, the Voile d'Or at Cap Ferrat, near Monte Carlo.

One can't help but sympathise with Verno's disappointment when he first lays eyes on the Hotel Splendide, and with the filmmakers too. The makers of this 'quota quickie' wanted to make real films, not simply enough celluloid to satisfy the legal requirements of the Quota Act. In this sense the hotel, and Verno's enthusiastic attempts to help revitalise and refurbish it in order to attract as many customers as possible, echo the enthusiasm and ambition of its young director. Powell even appears in a small role as 'Marconi', one of the gang of thieves.

The script is often over complicated, with writer Philip MacDonald taking his characteristic interest in disguises and false identities to bewildering extremes. It can be seen in *Rynox*, in which the whole plot depends on a disguise, and reached its zenith in *The List of Adrian Messenger* (d. John Huston, 1963), with all the guest stars unrecognisable under heavy make-up. Practically every character in *Splendide* is not what they seem (even Verno is seen pretending to be his own boss at the beginning of the film). In addition, an almost camp quality is introduced, with the lead villain, named 'Pussy' Saunders for his trademark cat, spending practically the entire film in drag.

The film has a number of nice visual touches, especially in the last part, which is very atmospherically filmed, with an effective use of high angle shots and low-key lighting. This section also features Gounod's 'Funeral March of the Marionettes', best known today as the theme tune of the American TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

Sergio Angelini